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a Biographical Sketch.

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Charles Meryon

A Biographical Sketch

By

Frederick Keppel

Frederick Keppel & Co.
4 East 39th Street
New York

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THE DE VINNE PRESS

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Portrait of Charles Meryon.

From the etching by Félix Bracquemond.

Charles Meryon

A Biographical Sketch

ALTHOUGH Charles Meryon would not be a very old man were he living to-day, yet the difficulty of procuring his etchings is almost as great as it would be in the case of Rembrandt, Van Dyck or Claude. Few were printed, because few were wanted, and to-day these few are eagerly sought for, or jealously hoarded by those who possess them.

Forty years ago Meryon would gladly have sold one of his finest prints for the price of his breakfast. The value to-day of that same etching would have sufficed to maintain him in comfort for a year,—but neglect, disappointment and want drove him insane, and he died miserably in the madhouse of Paris in 1868.

"The case of Charles Meryon is one of those painful ones which recur in every generation, to prove the fallibility of the popular judgment. Meryon was one of the greatest and

most original artists who have appeared in Europe; he is one of the immortals; his name will be inscribed on the noble roll where Dürer and Rembrandt live forever. . . . Meryon was sorely tried by public and national indifference, and in a moment of bitter discouragement he destroyed the most magnificent series of his plates. When we think of the scores of mediocre engravers of all kinds, who, without one ray of imagination, live decently and contentedly by their trade, and then of this rare and sublime genius actually ploughing deep burin lines across his inspired work, because no man regarded it; and when we remember that this took place in Paris, in our own enlightened nineteenth century, it makes us doubt whether, after all, we are much better than savages or barbarians."

Since Mr. Hamerton wrote the eloquent paragraph just quoted, we have had formal biographies of Meryon and learned and critical commentaries on his etchings, while public museums vie with wealthy amateurs for their possession; but all too late for poor Meryon! His brother etcher, Sir Seymour Haden, who was his senior, is alive to-day and enjoying the renown that his works have brought him — while for thirty-seven years, Meryon "sleeps

Il guette la saison où l'éternelle Lazare
Sur la Grande Cité ramènera sa pâture.

Le Stryge.

Le Petit Pont.

L'Arche du Pont Notre Dame.

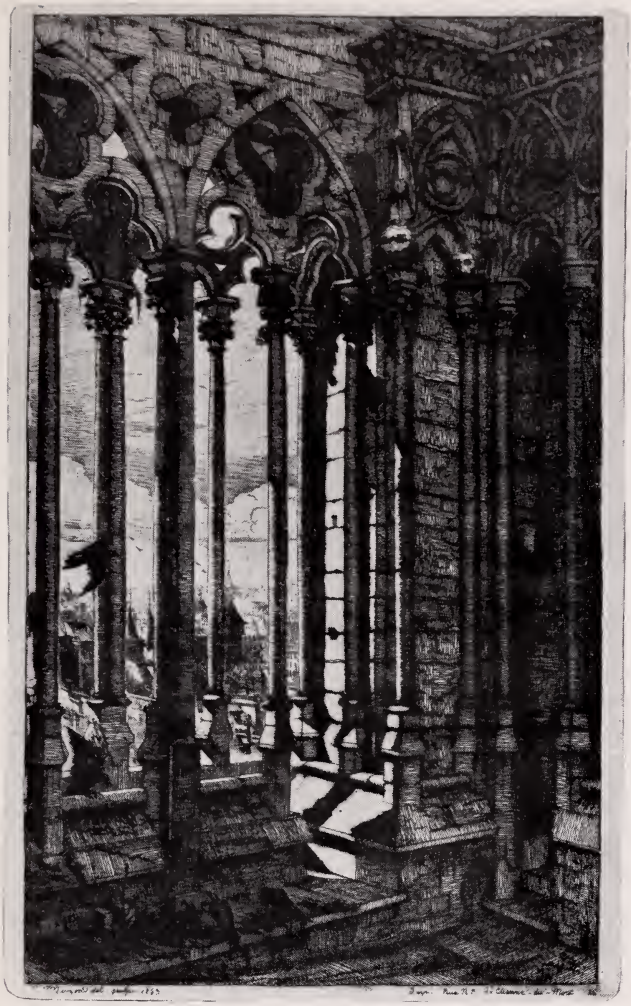
well," after what surely was to him "life's fitful fever," and lies buried in the cemetery of the asylum at Charenton.

Charles Meryon was born in Paris on the 23d of November, 1821. He was the son of Charles Lewys Meryon, an English physician. His mother was Pierre Narcisse Chaspoux, a French ballet dancer. The father seems to have neglected him utterly ; while his mother did all that she could for her son—watching over his education with tender care, and at her death leaving him 20,000 francs.

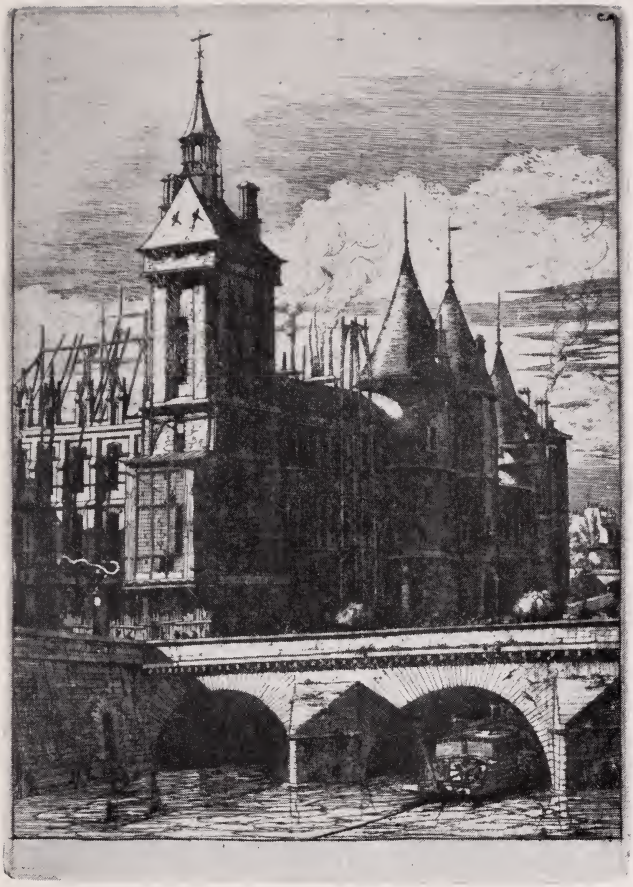
In his seventeenth year Meryon entered the Naval School at Brest, and after two years of study went to sea as a cadet, and in due time rose to the rank of lieutenant. During the seven years spent in the Navy he visited New Zealand, Australia, and New Caledonia, as well as the seaports of the Mediterranean ; and it was in 1846 that, owing to the feebleness of his constitution, he resigned his commission, and, taking a studio in the old Latin quarter of Paris, resolved to study painting. He soon found this career closed against him by reason of his color-blindness, and he did not discover his true vocation until his attention was directed to etching by Eugène Bléry, whose pupil he became for six months. Bléry worked some-

what in the conventional style of De Boissieu, and he evidently taught his pupil nothing except the mere technique of the process. Meryon's real master in art was Reinier Zeeman, a Dutch etcher of the seventeenth century, whose views of the Paris of his day inspired our artist to undertake the great work of his life—his "Eaux fortes sur Paris."

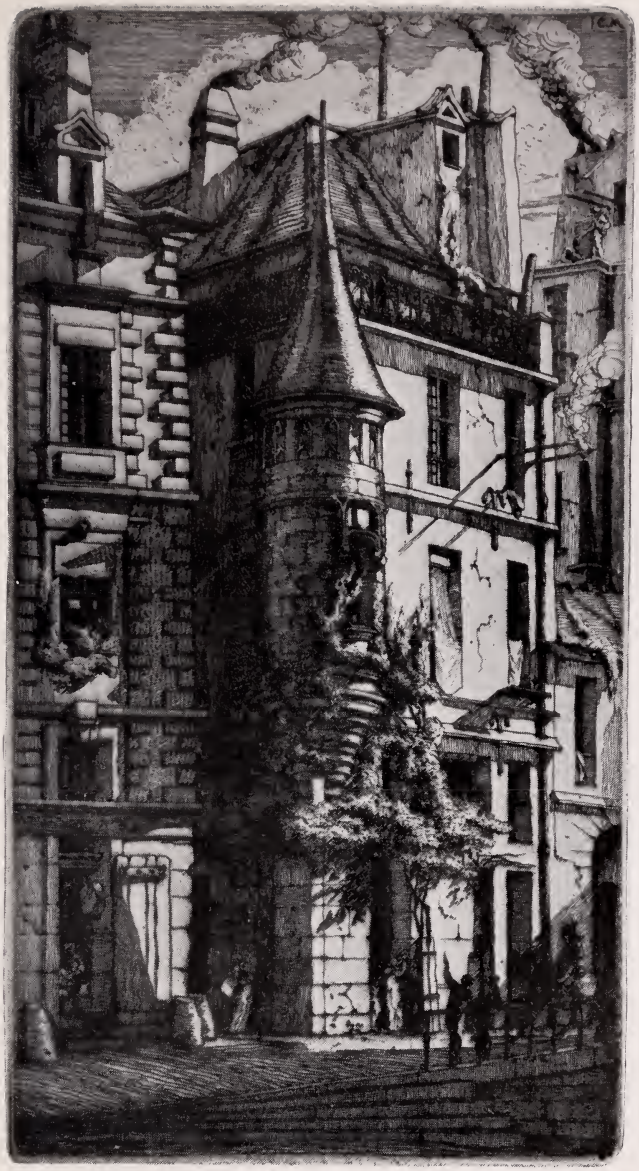
At this time Baron Haussmann, under the commands of Louis Napoleon, was constructing his monotonously handsome modern streets and boulevards out of the picturesque labyrinth of old Paris; not reverently restoring and preserving, but ruthlessly demolishing and obliterating; and Meryon's passionate artist-soul was grieved at a destruction which he was powerless to prevent. Had those men but known what a rare genius was among them, and had they then commissioned him to do adequately and with authority what he did furtively and incompletely, the world would have been the richer by a completed masterpiece, and the precious life of Meryon might have been preserved. But the great opportunity was lost, and it was amid discouragement, sickness, and poverty that Meryon etched "the most magnificent series of his plates." The enlightened committee of the *Salon* refused admission to these superb



La Galerie de Notre Dame.



La Tour de l'Horloge.



Tourelle, Rue de la Tixeranderie.

works ; the wealthy publishers would not touch them, and the artist was fain to leave a few here and there "on sale" among the "petits marchands" of the Latin quarter.

A pathetic story of this period, never before published, was related to the writer by Monsieur Beillet, a patriarchal old man, who, after having worked at the same printing-press for forty-eight years, has recently retired on a competency of six francs a day : "Meryon came stealing into my atelier, looking even more nervous and wild than usual, and bringing with him two sheets of paper and the plate of his Abside de Notre Dame. 'Monsieur Beillet,' said he, 'I want you to print me two proofs of this plate,' and added, timidly, 'I cannot pay you till I sell them—don't refuse me!'" "How much did you charge him for the printing?" "Oh, dix sous les deux." (Ten cents, that Meryon could not pay for two proofs of his loveliest plate !) An exclamation of pity on his hearer's part was mistakenly appropriated by the practical old printer, for he added : "Mais oui, Monsieur,—I never got my money."

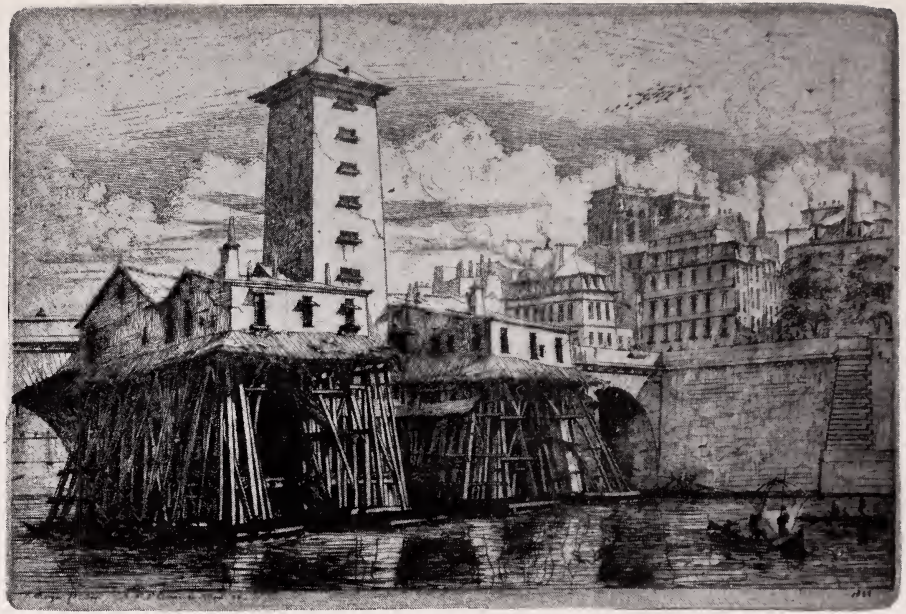
Such an accumulation of troubles might well have broken down a healthier mind. In a fit of frenzy he destroyed his finest plates, and peace only came to him when they laid him in

a lunatic's grave. He died on the 14th of February, 1868.

Our first impulse is to be angry with those who, knowing him to be a great artist, yet allowed him to perish ; but Meryon was a man whom it was not easy to befriend ; he was morbidly suspicious and irritable, and would accept nothing that looked like a charity.

Seymour Haden, Philip Burty, and Monsieur Niel, all tried to aid him, but were repulsed in a manner that would have been inexcusable in a sane man. Sir Seymour Haden writes: "One day, though I knew the difficulty of approaching him, I went to see Meryon. I found him in a little room, high up on Montmartre, scrupulously clean and orderly; a bed in one corner, a printing-press in another, a single chair and a small table in another, and in the fourth an easel with a plate pinned against it, at which he was standing at work. He did not resent my visit, but, with a courtesy quite natural, offered me, and apologized for, the single chair, and at once began to discuss the resources and charms of Etching. He was also good enough to allow me to take away with me a few impressions of his work, for which, while his back was turned, I was no less scrupulous to leave upon the table, what I was sure was more than the dealers

St. Étienne-du-Mont.



La Pompe Notre Dame.

Le Pont Neuf.

would then give him for them ; and so we parted, the best of friends. But what followed shows how, even then, his mind was unhinged. I had walked fully two miles in the direction of Paris, and was entering a shop in the Rue de Richelieu, when I became aware that Meryon, much agitated, was following me. He said he must have back the proofs I had bought of him ; that they were of a nature to compromise him, and that from what he knew of 'the Etched Work which I called my own,' he was determined I should not take them to England with me ! I, of course, gave them to him, and he went his way."

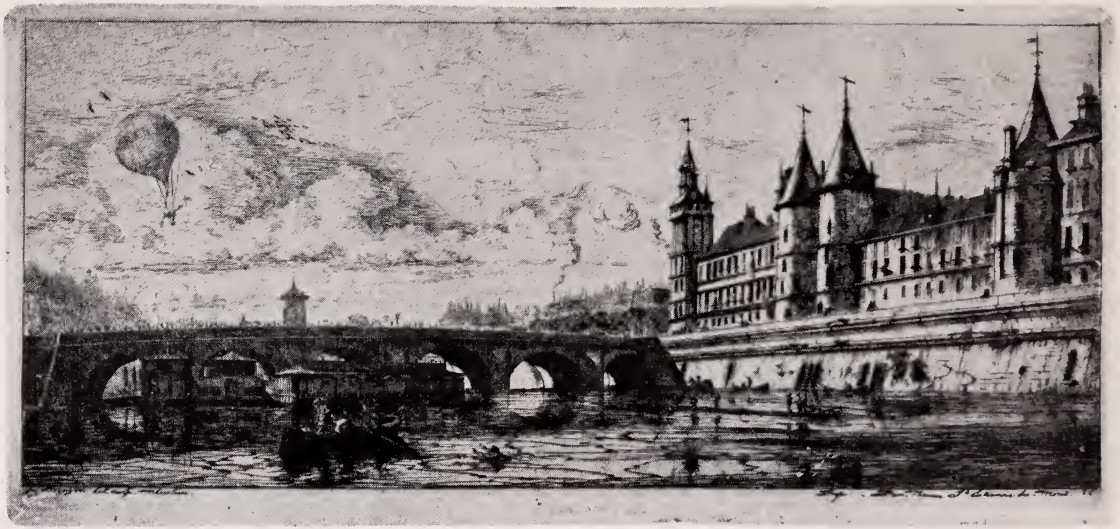
The same eminent authority says : "The art of Meryon stands alone. Like the work of every true genius, it resembles in no one feature the work of any one else. His method was this—First, he made not a sketch but a number of sketches, two or three inches square, of parts of his picture, which he put together and arranged into a harmonious whole. What is singular, and a proof of his concentrativeness, is that the result has none of the artificial character usual to this kind of treatment, but that it is always broad and simple, and that the poetical motive is never lost sight of." Mr. Hamerton says : "His work was sanity itself,"—and

Victor Hugo wrote during the artist's lifetime : "These etchings are magnificent things. We must not allow this splendid imagination to be worsted in the struggle. Strengthen him by all the encouragements possible."

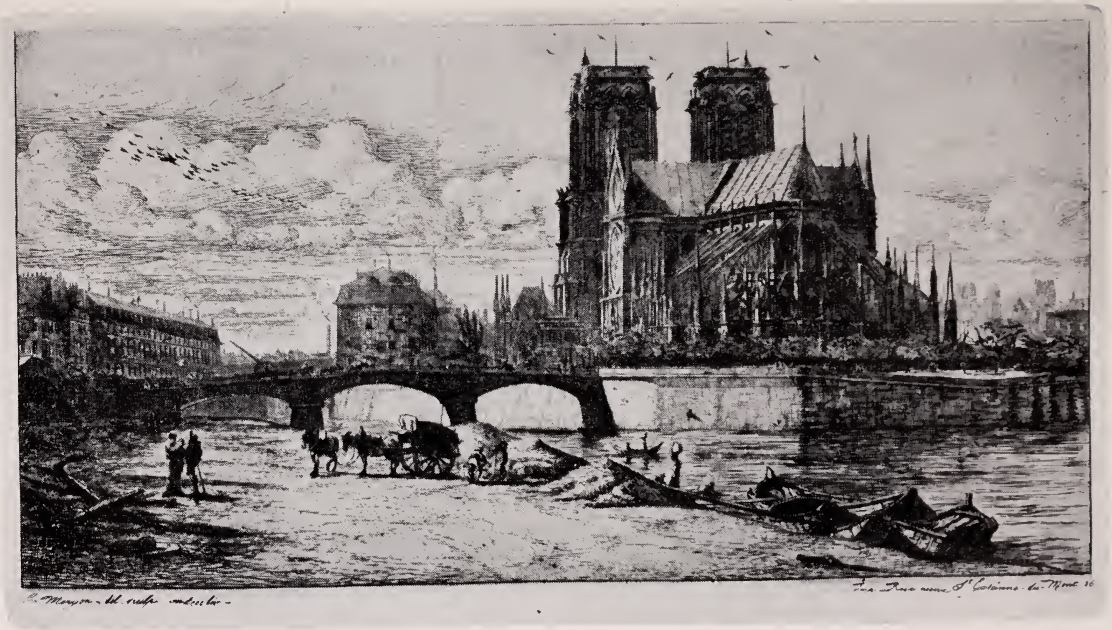
While the renown of Meryon must always rest upon the twelve principal plates of the "Paris Set," yet his personality—if not his great art—is maintained in several prints of fantastic verses, composed as well as etched by himself. These verses remind one of the similar productions of William Blake ; but here the parallel ends, for the English artist, though always poor, lived a happy life and died at a good old age.

Others of his works (notably some of the portraits) were done for bread, and the etcher evidently had little heart in his work. But though some of those prints are greatly inferior to others, yet everything from the hand of this unique genius is worthy of study.

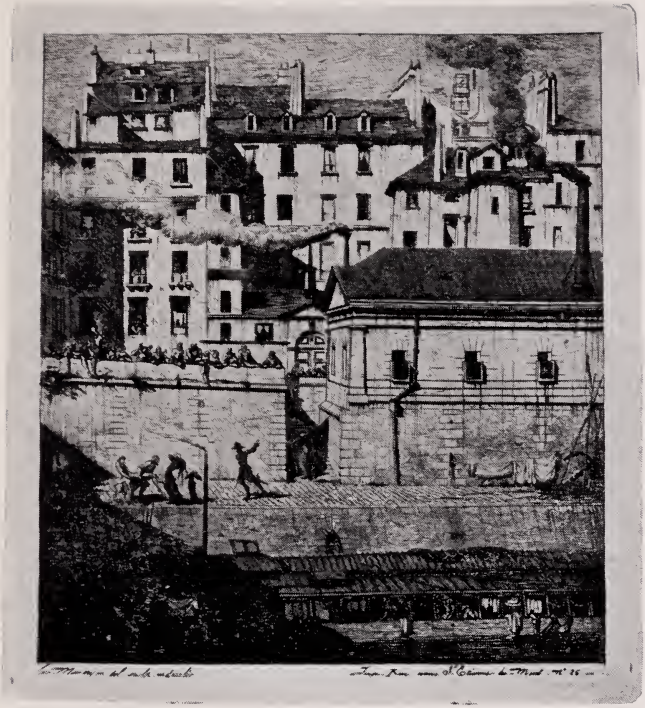
Thus lived, suffered and died the unhappy Meryon. To him, of all artists, was reserved the power to make stone walls eloquent. Rembrandt could paint or etch the soul of a man in his face ; Corot made every landscape a poem ; but Meryon, while giving exact pictures of the buildings of his native city, im-



Le Pont au Change.



L'Abside de Notre Dame de Paris.



La Morgue.

parted to them at the same time his own intense personality to a degree never before achieved.

The style and touch of any great artist are easily recognized ; for example, the Italian Piranesi, whose etchings of ancient Roman ruins have a grandiose splendor almost greater than the buildings themselves ; but style is a different endowment from this intangible gift of personality. John Stuart Mill gives us an intellectual impersonality ; but who can read the " Vicar of Wakefield " and not feel the intimate presence of Oliver Goldsmith ? Or the Essays of Elia without thinking of Charles Lamb more than of his book ?

Similarly, the man Meryon seems present in every line that he drew, and now that he is at rest posterity will keep his memory green.

Frederick Keppel.

Note : In printing the preceding article we omit the acute accent (é) which the French always use in spelling Meryon's name. The fact is that Meryon himself never used this accent.

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